

A Summarized History of the Stations of the Cross

The devotion originated in the late 4th century when pilgrims flocked to the Holy Land from all parts of the world to visit the land of Jesus. Heading the list of places they visited was the Church of the Holy Sepulcher, which had been built by the Emperor Constantine in 335 AD atop Calvary and the tomb of Jesus.

Processions of pilgrims to the Church of the Holy Sepulcher were common. Egeria, a woman from Gaul who traveled to the Holy Land in the 4th century, recalls in her diary how she joined Christians from all parts of the Roman world walking westward on Holy Thursday from the garden of Gethsemane to the church of the Holy Sepulcher, where they celebrated Jesus' death and resurrection.

The Via Dolorosa

Over the years, the route of pilgrim processions — beginning at the ruins of the Fortress Antonia and ending at the church of the Holy Sepulcher — was accepted as the way that Jesus went to his death. It was known as the "Via Dolorosa," the "Sorrowful Way;" Today, it winds through the crowded areas of Jerusalem's Old City, and pilgrims still travel it in prayer.

At the end of the 17th century, the erection of stations in churches became more popular. In 1686, Pope Innocent XI, realizing that few people could travel to the Holy Land due to the Moslem oppression, granted the right to erect stations in all of their churches and that the same indulgences would be given to the Franciscans and those affiliated with them for practicing the devotion as if on an actual pilgrimage. Pope Benedict XIII extended these indulgences to all of the faithful in 1726.

Five years later, Pope Clement XII permitted stations to be created in all churches and fixed the number at 14. In 1742, Pope Benedict XIV exhorted all priests to enrich their churches with the Way of the Cross, which must include 14 crosses and are usually accompanied with pictures or images of each particular station. The popularity of the devotion was also encouraged by preachers like St. Leonard Casanova (1676-1751) of Porto Maurizio, Italy, who reportedly erected over 600 sets of stations throughout Italy.

To date, there are 14 traditional stations: Pilate condemns Christ to death; Jesus carries the cross; the first fall; Jesus meets His Blessed Mother; Simon of Cyrene helps to carry the cross; Veronica wipes the face of Jesus; the second fall; Jesus speaks to the women of Jerusalem; the third fall; Jesus is stripped of His garments; Jesus is nailed to the cross; Jesus dies on the cross; Jesus is taken down from the cross; and Jesus is laid in the tomb.

Because of the intrinsic relationship between the passion and death of our Lord with His resurrection, several of the devotional booklets now include a 15th station, which commemorates the Resurrection. A plenary indulgence is granted for those who piously exercise the Way of the Cross, actually moving from station to station where they are legitimately erected and while meditating on the passion and death of our Lord ("Enchiridion of Indulgences," No. 63). Those who are impeded from visiting a church may gain the same indulgence by piously reading and meditating on the passion and death of our Lord for one-half hour. The continued importance of the stations in the devotional life of Catholics is attested by both Pope Paul VI, who approved a Gospel-based version of the stations in 1975, and Pope John Paul II, who has also written his own version.

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